# DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN ARTISTS

# ABBOTT H. THAYER

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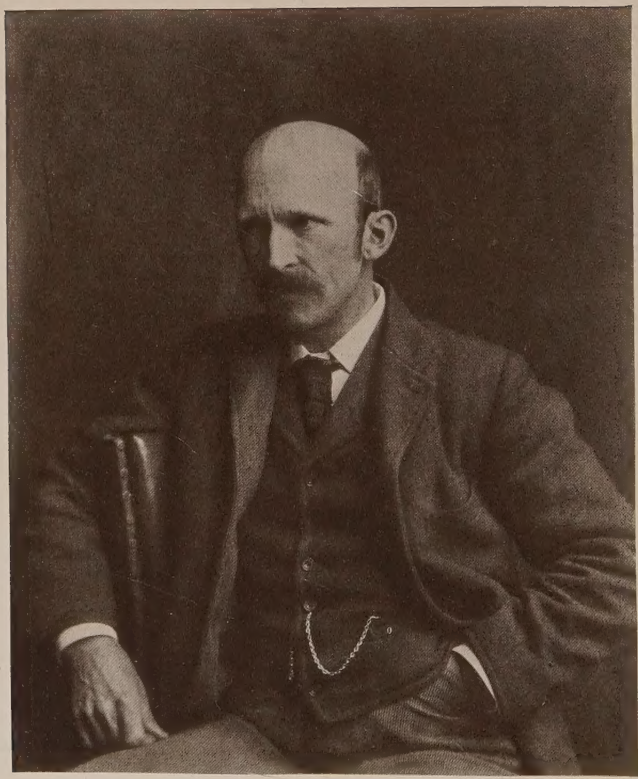
# ABBOTT H. THAYER



Abbott Handerson Thayer

*DISTINGUISHED AMERICAN ARTISTS*

# ABBOTT H. THAYER

*Compiled by*

NATHANIEL POUSETTE-DART

*With an Introduction by Royal Cortissoz*

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## ABBOTT H. THAYER

ABBOTT HANDERSON THAYER was born in Boston on August 12th 1849. He spent his boyhood in New Hampshire, where an open air life was favorable to the development of a tendency toward scientific exactitude inherited from his father, a doctor. He scrutinized nature with the curiosity of a naturalist. Doubtless it was in this impressionable period that he laid the foundations of his future work in the study of protective coloration. As a young artist, trained at the Academy of Design, his first ambitions were those of an animal painter. There turned up in an auction sale in New York some time ago a "Nature Morte" that he had painted in 1868. In it contemporary observers would have been justified in discerning the first fruits of a master of realism. When he went to Paris in 1875 and entered the atelier of Gerome he ratified this conception of his artistic character and he seemed, too, to be submerged in a foreign method. There are early French landscapes of his which might have been done by a more or less conventional habitué of the Salon. Acquiring under Gerome a firm, clean-cut habit in the definition of form, he was nominally on the way to becoming simply one more Franco-American type of sound craftsmanship. But Thayer was nothing if not a spiritual entity and he was soon to disclose gifts transcending the routine of Paris.

The inquirer who is in search of Thayer's secret will clarify the subject if he will recognize in it the operation

of what I can only call destiny. This painter had more than one string to his bow. He began, as I have said, as an *animalier*. He painted flowers, and, as it happened, painted them superbly. He could make a sea piece an enchanting study in color. In his pictures of Monadnock he turns still another page in what one feels must have been a singularly varied life. Technically his paintings of this mountain are of the highest interest. It was for him no distant peak, "lost in mist." On the contrary, his vagueness, his broad generalization, is all in the sylvan foreground. Far beyond the obscurities of foliage he draws the topmost contour of the mountain with the sharpest linear precision, silhouettes it against the sky unteased by cloud forms. "How versatile he was," one murmurs, considering the animal pictures, the flowers and the rest. "If he had dedicated himself entirely to landscape he would have made himself one of the great masters of the art." But something else pulled at his heart strings, the destiny to which I have alluded.

It is the source of everything that eternally endures in art. The real revelation of a painter's genius comes when he pours into his work, artlessly, spontaneously, not only the resources of the technician but the qualities of his innermost soul. Thayer first thus declared himself when he got his stride in the painting of portraits of women. He made a few portraits of men, including studies of himself. They are interesting. He could not be dull. But men never inspired him. Nor did women, for that matter, immediately release the powers of his genius. I remember one portrait dating from his tentative period which is merely careful, polished, the work of a good journeyman. Then, in that very period, the period of the '80's, he found himself, the true Thayer stepped forth,

and henceforth he was a creative master. The studies of women he painted at this time are primarily, no doubt, portraits, characterizations of specific sitters, but they are even more to be regarded as vehicles for the expression of that spiritualized aesthetic emotion which was Thayer's gift to American art. Technically, by the way, they indicate not only a capable but a courageous hand. In them it was plain that Thayer was not afraid of white, the color which so often leads an artist to disaster. The whites in his early portraits have the mellow depth of old ivory. But technique, as is the way with Thayer, is subordinate to a richer interest. It is an inner flame that gives life to a painting by him.

He often wrote to me about his work and in one of his letters there is a passage so apposite here that I must quote it. He says: "The violin, whose strings ring whenever their note is sounded by an outside instrument, is pure symbol of the poet. In the poet cumulative images of every form of beauty begin in earliest infancy to occupy the brain, till, in his early maturity, these have become true touchstones, like the violin string. Let the painter once look upon a person who has, no matter how many surface defects, one dominant greatness—purity at heart and fiery love of truth and beauty—and in his own heart the image of such a personality wakes into brilliant ringing clearness and takes the helm."

The painter, on this hypothesis, is a clairvoyant type. That is what Thayer was. He was a reader of enigmas of femininity, the solution of which consisted in the expression of his own ideal of beauty. In his work in pure portraiture he was not neglectful of his sitter, as this saying might seem to suggest. It was rather that womanhood roused in him a profound imaginative sympa-

thy, which in turn enveloped and saturated the object of his study. The outcome was both a portrait and "a Thayer." Realistic truth was entirely consistent with this spiritualization of his theme. In rising from portraiture to the celebration of impersonal figures he steadfastly preserved his hold upon life as he observed it here in our twentieth century. If you look strictly to the angelic sweetness of the type he loved to portray you might be tempted to say that he painted Madonnas, but nothing could be further from the truth. The word connotes suggestions which do not emanate from his canvases. He painted woman pure and simple. The great picture in the Boston Museum is called "Caritas." The kindred composition in the Freer Gallery at Washington is called "The Virgin." In the Gellatly collection in New York there is a "Virgin Enthroned." Thayer was fond of the strictly descriptive title, "Winged Figure," and it is affixed to more than one of his designs. Yet these imaginative conceptions of his are essentially studies of humanity. That is where he is most intensely an American. No tradition, no convention, comes between us and his raciness. The truth of life is in everything he painted —the truth lifted to a higher power, enriched by the beauty which flowed magically into his work from his natural habit of thinking and feeling.

There is a notable picture of his called "Figure Half Draped." It is what might be called, in the old French phrase, "an academy," a study of the nude which might or might not have been carried forward into the expression of some symbolical idea. One can imagine it, if it had been finished, sent out into the world to be associated in our minds with the "Caritas" or the "Stevenson Memorial." As it is, accompanied by no allegorical or

other accessories, it concentrates attention first on Thayer's technique and then on the mysterious beauty to which I am constantly referring. The head and torso are gloriously painted, with a positively grand breadth and with a refinement that seems to go into the very grain of the workmanship. The drapery has the simple dignity and the everlasting rightness which only a master can achieve in handling so difficult a problem. The low tones show Thayer in his most individual key. But the essence of the painting eludes description. One feels it, again, as an affair of the spirit. The serene beauty of this painting is like the beauty of poetry and music, of noble thought.

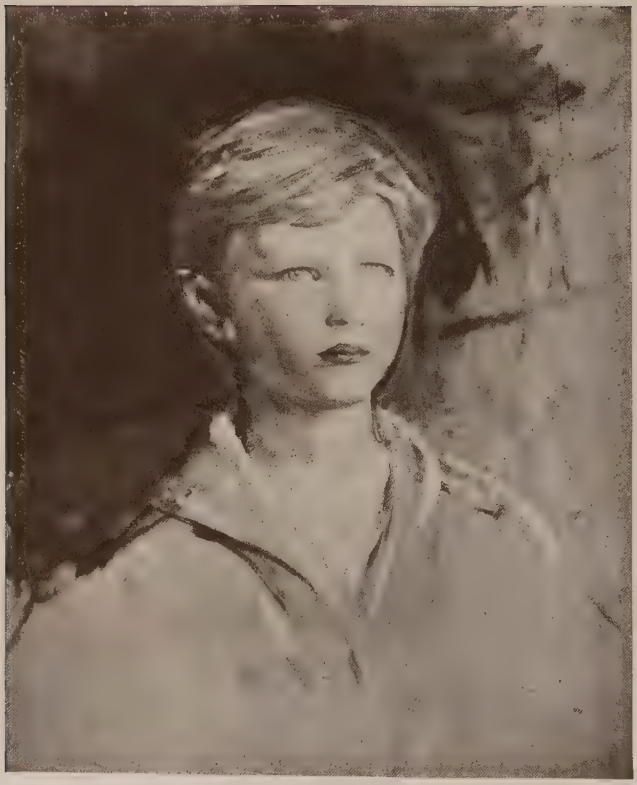
Two points remain to be stressed in the explication of Thayer's charm. It is a singular phenomenon in his work that, while it is concerned so devotedly with the mystery of womanhood and childhood, with an almost unvarying theme, it still possesses remarkable diversity. These fairly mystical portraits of his are always and forever new. The second and kindred virtue in him to which I would direct attention is his strength and range as a colorist, albeit he is never glowing and is content with a few restrained notes. Apprehend the dark green to which he was addicted, the passages of deep wine-red which occur in him now and then, his pure blues, his romantic purples and the white of which he was especially fond, and you have practically exhausted his gamut. The wings of one of his angels have the splendor of beaten bronze. The robe of another is of a grayish brown he did not often use. He had his adventures, his new flights, as a colorist. On the whole, however, he confined himself to a comparatively narrow scale—and worked wonders with it. Individuality was at the bottom

of his color. By intensity of refinement he translated it into terms of beauty. His canvases have, in the main, a striking solidity, but there is a loveliness of tone in them sometimes which is as fragile and as exquisite as that of a roseleaf.

Genius won him his victories, that and a passion for artistic perfection. He made a good many drawings, first and last, studies of heads and hands, ideas for compositions and so on. They reflect his ardor and his conscientiousness as a workman, his curiosity as to form, his command over line. He never made a fetish of craftsmanship. In a letter to me, apropos of a painting he had just completed, he says: "It is always silly to think or say that one's last work is progress. So many traits are at work maturing themselves, especially in the attempts of a man advanced in years. He may gain, as I seem to, in accomplishment, while his earlier things remain the most valuable, sweetest flavored, perhaps." This attitude of his accounts for what seems unfinished or hasty in some of his paintings. Technical accomplishment was not as important in his eyes as the spirit of things. He followed the seemingly capricious path of the man of genius. But, being a man of genius, he took technical accomplishment as he went along. One of the lasting lessons of his work is that only a powerful painter, in the strictest meaning of the phrase, could have produced it. But the chief lesson his pictures enforce is that they sprang from creative inspiration, and, coming from such a source, testify to the supremacy of elevated ideas, of spiritual beauty. When Thayer died, on May 29th, 1921, he left behind him one of the noblest heritages in American art.

ROYAL CORTISSOZ.

*The sixty-four paintings herein reproduced illustrate the varied characteristics of this artist's work.*



HEAD OF A BOY
*Owned by George J. Dyer*

GLADYS
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

GIRL IN WHITE
*Privately Owned*

YOUNG WOMAN
*Owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

STEVENSON MEMORIAL
*Privately Owned*

VIRGIN ENTHRONED
*Privately Owned*

ANGEL OF DAWN
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

MONADNOCK ANGEL
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

SELF PORTRAIT
*Owned by Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.*

ANGEL
*Owned by the Freer Memorial Gallery*

FIGURE HALF-DRAPED
*Privately Owned*

WINGED FIGURE
*Owned by Smith College*

MOTHER AND CHILD
*Privately Owned*

THE VIRGIN
*Owned by the Freer Memorial Gallery*

PORTRAIT OF A LITTLE GIRL
*Owned by the Worcester Art Museum*

BROTHER AND SISTER
*Privately Owned*

PORTRAIT
*Privately Owned*

MARY
*Owned by Mrs. Louis F. Hyde*

PORTRAIT
*Owned by Mrs. William F. Milton*

19258

ROSEMARY
*Owned by Mrs. Thomas Millie Dow*

PROFILE, YOUNG WOMAN
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

YOUNG MAN
*Owned by the Brooklyn Museum of Art*

LADY IN GREEN VELVET
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

Girl in Fur Hood

GIRL ARRANGING HER HAIR
*Privately Owned*

ELIZABETH FULLER
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

PORTRAIT-STUDY
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

PORTRAIT
*Privately Owned*

PORTRAIT OF ALICE FREEMAN PALMER
*Owned by Wellesley College*

PORTRAIT OF MISS FAITH MATHEWSON
*Owned by William G. Mathewson*

PORTRAIT
*Owned by Mrs. Hendrick S. Holden*

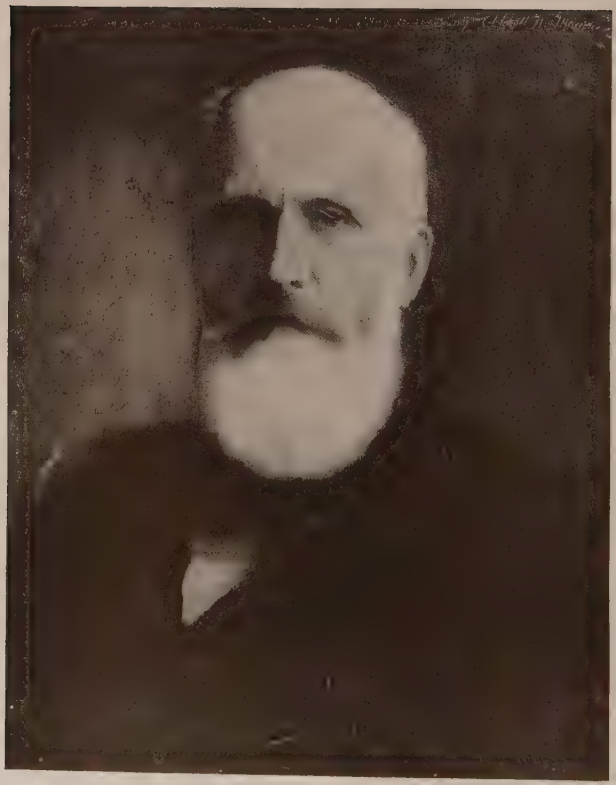
PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG GIRL
*Owned by the Estate of Walter Hunnewell*

PORTRAIT OF A LITTLE GIRL
*Owned by Mrs. J. Montgomery Sears*

PORTRAIT OF BEATRICE
*Owned by Mrs. Hendrick S. Holden*

THE ARTIST'S SON
*Owned by the Freer Memorial Gallery*

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S SISTER
*Owned by Mrs. E. M. Whiting*



THE ARTIST'S FATHER
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

THE ARTIST'S DAUGHTER
*Owned by the Freer Memorial Gallery*

My Children
*Privately Owned*

DIANA
*Owned by the Freer Memorial Gallery*

ANGEL
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

STUDY OF HEAD
(The Artist's Daughter, March, 1921)
*Owned by Mr. and Mrs. David Reasoner*

Ideal Head

Baby Asleep

*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

Portrait of a Little Girl

WINTER SUNRISE, MONADNOCK
*Owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

CATTLE
*Owned by Miss Ellen J. Stone*

CORNISH HEADLANDS
*Courtesy Milch Galleries*

Landscape With Cattle

At the Market

*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

Crossing the Ferry
*Owned by Charles C. Burlingham*

CAPRI
*Owned by the Freer Memorial Gallery*

Little Girl

ROSES

*Owned by the Worcester Art Museum*

PASSENGER PIGEONS
*Owned by Edward and Albert Milch*

WATER-LILIES
*Owned by Professor Henry Taber*

LITTLE GIRL
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG LADY
*Courtesy Milch Galleries*

WINGED FIGURE
*Owned by John F. Braun*

CARITAS

*Owned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*

BOY AND ANGEL
*Owned by the Estate of Abbott H. Thayer*

FLORENCE PROTECTING THE ARTS
(Large Mural)
*Owned by Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine*

WINGED FIGURE
*Freer Memorial Gallery*

ANGEL
*Privately Owned*

ABBOTT HANDERSON THAYER, Pupil of Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris, under Gerome and Lehman.

Born, Boston, Mass., August 12, 1849. Died, Monadnock, New Hampshire, May 29, 1921.

## MEMBER OF

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND LETTERS
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF DESIGN, New York—*Associate*, 1898.
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF DESIGN, New York—*Academician*
MURAL PAINTERS
SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARTISTS, 1879, *President* (two years)
SOCIETA DELLE BELLE ARTI DENOMINATA DI SAN LUCA, Rome
AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION
AUDUBON SOCIETY
SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF NEW HAMPSHIRE FORESTS—*Honorary Vice-President*

## AWARDS

Gold Pallette, for best drawing from antique, Academy of Design, Brooklyn, New York, 1869.
Bronze Medal, Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1889.
Temple Gold Medal, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1891.
Bronze Medal, Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.
Elkins Prize, $5,000, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1895. (This prize was divided, $3,000 to Mr. Thayer, $2,000 to Edmund C. Tarbell.)
Thomas B. Clarke Prize, National Academy of Design, New York, 1898.
Gold Medal, Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1900.
Gold Medal, Pan-American Exposition, Buffalo, 1901.
Saltus Medal for Merit, National Academy of Design, New York, 1915.
Medal of the First Class (Gold) carrying with it a prize of $1,500, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1920.

## REPRESENTED IN

BOSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS.
BROOKLYN MUSEUM.
CINCINNATI MUSEUM ASSOCIATION.
CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D. C.
DEPARTMENT OF FINE ARTS, CARNEGIE INSTITUTE, PITTSBURGH, PA.
FREER MEMORIAL GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D. C., *Sixteen examples (one complete room and a portion of another).*
HILLYER ART GALLERY, SMITH COLLEGE, NORTHAMPTON, MASS.
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK CITY, *Four examples.*
WALKER ART BUILDING, BOWDOIN COLLEGE, BRUNSWICK, ME., *Large Mural, "Florence Protecting the Arts."*
WELLESLEY COLLEGE, WELLESLEY, MASS.
WORCESTER ART MUSEUM.

## PUBLISHED MATTER

*Academy Notes,* vol. 16, Buffalo, 1921. Buffalo Fine Arts Academy. A Tribute.

*American Magazine of Art,* May, 1922. Memorial Exhibition, Metropolitan Museum. Review of Abbott H. Thayer. —Maria Oakey Dewing.

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*Bird Lore,* vol. 23, pp. 227-8., July, 1921. Abbott H. Thayer's contribution to bird protection.—T. S. Palmer.

*Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences,* Brooklyn Museum, 1922. Exhibition of paintings and studies illustrating camouflage in nature, by Abbott H. Thayer and Gerald H. Thayer.

*Carnegie Institute,* 1919. Catalogue. Abbott H. Thayer. Introduction.—H. M. B.

*Granite Monthly,* vol. 54, illustrated. Concord, N. H., 1922. Abbott H. Thayer Memorial Exhibition.—Alice Dinsmoor.

*House Beautiful,* vol. 13, 1902. Abbott H. Thayer, His Paintings.—Pauline King.

*International Studio,* vol. 6, also Studio, London, 1899. An American Painter.—Mrs. Arthur Bell.

*International Studio,* vol. 33, 1908.—Homer Saint Gaudens.

*International Studio,* vol. 74, illustrated, New York, 1921. A Portrait and an appreciation.—Maria Oakey Dewing.

*International Studio,* vol. 74, New York, 1922. Nine pencil drawings. Notes by Gerald Thayer.

*Literary Digest, vol.* 69, p. 29, June 18, 1921. Father of camouflage. Abbott Thayer.

*Memorial Exhibition.* Corcoran Art Gallery. May, 1922. Introduction to Abbott H. Thayer.—Virgil Barker.

*Memorial Exhibition.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art. March, 1922. Introduction to Abbott H. Thayer.—Royal Cortissoz.

*Memorial Exhibition.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art. March 20–April 30, 1922. Work of Abbott Handerson Thayer.

*Milch Galleries,* December 5-31, 1921. Exhibition of works by Abbott H. Thayer belonging to the Thayer estate and including important works never before exhibited. In their exhibition catalogues.

*Nature,* vol. 107, pp. 596-7, July 7, 1921. Obituary.

*Representative Painters of the Nineteenth Century,* pp.53-56, 1 pl., 1899.—Mrs. N. R. E. Bell (Meugens).

*Scribner's Magazine,* vol. 70, illustrated, New York, 1921. —Helen M. Beatty.

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